

A Meeting of Minds

Hypothetical Interview with Niccolò Machiavelli

Interviewer: Please begin by telling our readers when and where you were born.

Machiavelli: I was born in 1469 in the Italian city of Florence.

Interviewer: Are you a political philosopher?

Machiavelli: I have written poetry, plays, short stories, and letters. My first love, however, is politics. In my book *The Prince* I teach my view of politics.

Interviewer: Why do you think government is necessary?

Machiavelli: People are never free of ambition; desire is endless. Because people desire but cannot get everything, their dissatisfaction is inevitable. This leads them into conflict, unless there is a stronger force to restrain them. Selfishness is such that a person will sooner forgive another for murdering his father than for depriving him of his inheritance. People will always be evil unless forced to do good.

Interviewer: What kind of “stronger force” do you propose?

Machiavelli: In *The Prince* I outline a plan for absolute rule in the form of one person—the prince. Because people are inclined to evil, the ruler must suppress them. The ruler must be all powerful and feared by the people. He must possess qualities of both a human being and a beast. As a beast, he should be both a fox and a lion: the fox can detect traps, as the lion cannot; the lion can frighten the wolves, as the fox cannot. He should strive to be a person of his word only when it is in his interest to do so. The ruler should seem to be merciful, faithful, humane, and religious, but he ought not to be so. Such characteristics limit a ruler and make him a danger to himself. He must know how not to be good.

Interviewer: Is it fair to say that you believe the end justifies the means?

Machiavelli: Yes. For the sake of a country's safety, there can be no reservations regarding an action or policy's justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, honor or shame. The ultimate consideration can only be what will preserve the life and liberty of the country. We cannot ignore what people are and only consider what they ought to be. Only the strong ruler, possessing wisdom, stable judgment, and power, can curb the corruptness of human beings and maintain peace.

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Hypothetical Interview with Thomas Hobbes

Interviewer: Please tell us where and when you were born.

Hobbes: I was born in 1588 in England. My mother gave birth to me upon hearing that the Spanish Armada was approaching England. In a way, it is as if my mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear.

Interviewer: Are you a political philosopher?

Hobbes: I am a political philosopher who draws from psychology and the new science of nature. I have written history, as well as about law and politics. My political philosophy is probably best presented in my book *Leviathan*, published in 1651.

Interviewer: Why is government necessary?

Hobbes: Without authority, human beings would live in a natural condition. In this condition, all persons have equal right to pursue the power, possessions, and resources necessary for a good life. Every person can use power to preserve life in any way deemed necessary. Every person's endless striving for power creates a predicament: people are necessarily drawn into competition. This leads to fighting and war, for the surest way to obtain power over a competitor is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other person. Life in this state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short!

Interviewer: What kind of government or political authority do you propose?

Hobbes: First, I want to talk about how government comes about. Human beings cannot long live in a state of anarchy and fear. The passion that moves people to leave this state of conflict and establish peace is the fear of violent death. This is the law of nature—a general rule, discovered by reason, which forbids a person to engage in self-destructive actions or to take away the means of preserving life. I prefer rule by a powerful monarch who creates conditions under which subjects can work and live in peace and harmony. The monarch must be strong and feared but also subject to the law of nature. If the monarch does not provide for peace, the people have a right to seek a new ruler.

Interviewer: By forming a peaceful society, do people give up rights?

Hobbes: People must give up the rights that brought them into conflict with others. Some force is needed, some sword, some person or persons standing outside the community to impose peace and compliance within the dictates of reason. People give up their rights and powers to this one person or sovereign assembly so that they, who by nature turn against each other, can become one society. Only in this way can the plurality of voices become one voice.

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Hypothetical Interview with John Locke

Interviewer: Please begin by telling where and when you were born.

Locke: I was born in 1632 in England.

Interviewer: You are famous as a philosopher and a political philosopher.

Locke: Yes. Because I know your interest is in political philosophy, you would be best served to read my book *Two Treatises of Government*.

Interviewer: Why is government among people necessary?

Locke: By nature people are free. Reason, which is the law of nature, teaches people that because all are equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in life, health, liberty, or possessions. The law of nature obliges every person to act so as to preserve himself and others. A person has no right to another's person or possessions. A person can be secure in his own safety and possessions only so long as others recognize that they have no right to them.

The state of nature presents a problem, however. People are independent and equal, but also insecure because there is no authority to judge violations of nature's law and punish offenders. Each person is his own interpreter and enforcer of nature's law. Inevitably, each person is partial to his own case; people become blind to any interpretation of reason's law but their own and begin to act against the law. The state of nature is then transformed into a state of war.

Interviewer: What remedy do you suggest for this problem?

Locke: Being by nature free, equal, and independent, people cannot be subjugated to the political power of another. They must consent to unite into a community for comfortable, safe, and peaceful living. When any number of people have consented to make one community or government, they make one political body. In this body, the majority has a right to act.

Interviewer: You believe in government by majority rule then?

Locke: Yes. The majority must choose the type of government deemed most appropriate: a democracy, an oligarchy, or even a monarchy. The government chosen makes little difference because all governments are bound by trust put in them by people and the law of God and nature. Governments are obligated to (1) govern by established laws, (2) enact only laws necessary for the good of the people, (3) not raise taxes on property without the people's consent, given by themselves or their deputies, and (4) not transfer the power of making laws to anyone else or to place it anywhere but with the people.

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Hypothetical Interview with Jean Jacques Rousseau

Interviewer: Please tell us where and when you were born.

Rousseau: I was born in Geneva in 1712.

Interviewer: You are said to be one of the great modern political writers.

Rousseau: You are very kind. My political arguments are best expressed in my book *The Social Contract*, published in 1762.

Interviewer: Why is government necessary?

Rousseau: Let me begin to answer the question by stating that the state of nature, as defined by Thomas Hobbes, no longer exists, perhaps never did, and probably never will exist. People are not basically selfish and evil. Although interested in self-preservation, they are basically compassionate and not the enemy of their kind. Government is necessary because people are born free, yet everywhere they are in chains. What I mean is that people are born free to do what their strength and liberty allow. This freedom results in a state of insecurity. To attain true freedom and stability, people must give up individual rights to the community. By agreement or contract, everyone gives up rights and no one gains power or advantage. Rights are given up not to a person or persons, but to the entire community, of which the individual is a part. Everyone gains the equivalent of what he loses and the increased force to conserve what he has. In giving himself to all, he gives himself to no one. Each of us puts his person and power under the supreme direction of the general will. Each member is an individual part of the whole.

Interviewer: What type of government do you think is best?

Rousseau: The social contract, or act of giving up individual power in favor of general will, creates a collective body that receives its unity, common ego, life, and will from this act. All participants are members of one body and function as a public person. Before, they were only individual persons. The general will is the interest of the community. Nothing may legitimately be done against that interest; otherwise a society ceases to be a community and becomes once again a mere collection of individuals. I believe that a democratic society or state, but not a democratic government, is best. The best government is one in which a few persons, under the control of the general will of the whole people, execute the laws and maintain civil and political liberty. Every society must have government, but there is no single form that is everywhere the best.